Sunday, September 22, 1985
HOPE FOR THE WORLD
John 3:14-17

How do you tell someone something they don't want to hear? Or how do you teach someone a lesson they don't want to learn? One way is to tell a story because people are much more ready to listen to a story than they are to a rebuke. Thus, Jesus Christ frequently used parables, short stories that contain a lesson. The prophets before Jesus did the same.

When Nathan wanted to let King David know that he had been immoral in stealing another man's wife — he didn't go to him and say that directly; rather, he told the king a story. Here's the story:

"There were two men in a certain city, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. It was the only thing he owned, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the guest who had come to him." (II Samuel 12:1-4)

A very short story. When King David heard it, he got very angry and said to Nathan the prophet, "As God is my witness, the kind of person who would do such a thing deserves to die; and he should also be made to restore the lamb fourfold."

And Nathan then delivered the punch line and said to David, "You are the man." And David was properly rebuked and repentant; he fell into the trap which Nathan set for him.

Our culture is filled with similar teaching stories. There's a story by Hans Christian Andersen regarding "The Emperor's New Clothes." And there are Aesop's Fables, such as "The Hare and the Tortoise" and "The Fox and the Crow." And there's the poem of "The Blind Men and the Elephant."

The Bible is filled with such teaching stories — some very brief like the parables, and some longer like the story of Jonah in the Old Testament. The Book of Jonah is not history, just as the story of the Prodigal Son in the New Testament is not history. However, the story of Jonah has historical reference.

The Book of Jonah is a very carefully written protest against the Jews' religious pride following the canonizing of the Law of Moses, which took place about 400 B.C. It is a rebuke against their expectation that God would soon annihilate the Gentiles for their, the Jews', benefit. It says, in effect, that the Jews as a people of God have a mission to the Gentiles which they were not willing to accept because they thought at that time that God belonged to them alone. It's a very powerful story because it reminds them and us that God intends to redeem the whole world. It reminds us that God is inclusive and not exclusive.

Thus, although it has a historical origin, the problems it addresses are just as acute today. It is the "Word of God" contained in the Bible, and it's an excellent example of how God continually speaks through the Bible.

It's a very short book in the Old Testament of the Bible — only about two and a half pages long. You can read it in five minutes. Jonah is not some prophet way back then. Jonah stands for "God's people," then and now. If we read the book correctly, we will recognize Jonah in us. And the city of Nineveh is not a particular city — it is a symbol of the cities of this world. It's a city of the heathen, of wickedness, of idolatry, of brutality and violence. It's a bloody city. It's the kind of place many good Christians would avoid, just as it was the kind of city that a good Hebrew would avoid.

In Nineveh, one sings, "Let us eat and drink and enjoy the good things of life, for tomorrow we are dead." In Nineveh, one dances around the golden calf and over dead bodies, over conscience and over the tears of the exploited. The smell of Nineveh rises out of scandal in high places, of high-sounding phrases which cover up festering sores of indifference and political hypocrisy.

But the Book of Jonah, like the Gospel of the New Testament, expresses radical hope for Nineveh, for this world. God is passionately concerned about Nineveh, that great city whose wickedness stinks to high heaven. Therefore, God has instructed the prophet Jonah to go to the people of Nineveh to declare that something new is about to happen. God is going to take action to reverse their purification. God so loves Nineveh that God is sending the prophet there so that all who would hear the prophet's witness and draw the correct conclusion from it would not perish. They shall be saved!

But it appears that God has chosen the wrong person to deliver the good news. Jonah didn't want to do it, so he ran from God by taking a ship in another direction — to the end of the world as far as he was concerned, because he believed God's grace should stop at the borders of Israel.

But God caught up with Jonah, sending a storm which threatened catastrophe for all on board ship. Nevertheless, Jonah remained stubbornly faithful to his belief to the extent that he was ready to die rather than carry out God's commission. So he finally let himself be thrown overboard to bring the whole matter to an end.

But that is not where the story ends. Jonah is saved in a manner quite contrary to common sense. Jonah can do what he wills right down to the bottom of the sea. But that is as far as he can go, for God will not let him end it all. God grants people freedom to run. God respects our wills even if they go contrary to God's will. But God will not let us sink away into utter chaos, for God has a goal in mind and God will not be frustrated. God will not let this world be lost without hope. God wills that it shall be saved by the preaching of the Gospel, and for that, God needs people like Jonah and churches like this one and others as well.

Our salvation, as God's Jonah, in a sense, is tied up with the world's salvation. We may give up because we don't really take God's great love for the whole world seriously. We may even betray our commission. But I believe that God nevertheless will, and can, make even our inadequacy serve God's end. Isn't this the lesson of the cross? Both Jews and Gentiles crucified Jesus, but the act is sealed with God's love, and behold, the evil act becomes the source of good.

This brings us to the fish in the story. For the instrument God uses to turn Jonah's bad intentions to good is this sea monster. Can't you almost see the twinkle in the eye of the one who told this story for the first time as he told about the size of this monster which swallowed Jonah?

The story is not relating history, but it does have a serious intent in telling us about this fish. This large fish, like the city of Nineveh, is a sign. Its immensity stands for the incalculable possibilities God has for bringing about the salvation of the world. What God won't do to make all things work out for the good!

Even this sea monster must serve God and God's will. But before Jonah is vomited out of the fish onto the shore in Nineveh, he must have a change of heart. In this connection, the three days and nights he spends in the belly of the monster play a role. If God is going to get the message across in Nineveh, God needs people who will not hide behind their holy self-righteousness. So Jonah was humbled.

After quite a detour, Jonah is in Nineveh where he didn't want to be. Again, God tells him to proclaim God's love for all people, no matter how wicked. God passionately loves Nineveh.

So now finally, reluctantly, Jonah begins to preach in Nineveh. We do not have much of his sermon — we only know that he is angry. He has no hope for Nineveh. He expects Nineveh to be judged harshly — to be wiped out by God.

So the storyteller cues us in. Jonah has not overcome Jonah yet. God's messengers remain human beings. They bring with them their own human opinions even when they obey. However, it needs to be pointed out that Christ has come since the story of Jonah, and His message was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," not "Judgment is knocking at your door; you don't have a future." When we call for repentance, we had better not play Jonah. Jesus has come and set Jonah straight.

In Christ's resurrection, God's kingdom and righteousness and peace have come near. That is why we have hope and good reason to repent. It means that the future for the world is as radical as God's love for the world. Therefore, we are not bound to any ideology or "ism" which claims it must impose itself on the world to save the world, be it capitalism, socialism, communism, nationalism, scientism, or anti-scientism. That means that as Christians, we are not to wear ideological blinders. And since God's love is for everyone equally, it means that any labels which segregate anybody as being other than ourselves, be they religious, racial, economic, or social, are to be rejected. In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. No one is God-forsaken or inferior to us.

Then something remarkable happens in Nineveh, in spite of Jonah's poor theology, and quite contrary to what most of us believe is possible. Nineveh repents! "The people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least of them." What God wants happens — and God accomplishes it with this half-hearted prophet.

No doubt the storyteller is pointing an accusing finger at Jerusalem, for nothing like that ever happened there, and how many prophets preached for repentance and renewal in that city? And does not the story point also a finger at our country and at our churches and us? One greater than Jonah has come to us. God certainly has given us more reason to repent. We have Christ, crucified and risen.

Now we would expect that Jonah would be elated at the success of his preaching — but he is not! Rather he conducted himself like a sulky child. God was moved to compassion by the response of the Ninevites, but not Jonah. He was angry. More than that, he was heartbroken.

He wanted to die when he saw that the people of Nineveh were to be saved from destruction. He wanted to see these evil people punished. He wanted to be able to say, “I told you so.” Like some good church people today, Jonah was not willing that God should be gracious, merciful, compassionate, forgiving, and of great kindness. More than that, Jonah was angry because people he had thought were worthless had repented and turned to God.

Can you imagine how angry some good Christian people are going to be when they discover in the next life that people they had always considered useless and inferior and not saved have been accepted in God’s gracious presence?

Even now, some are disappointed when someone they had always thought to be no good turns his or her life around and proves them wrong. But Nineveh’s repentance is the symbol of what true repentance is like. It is based on hope, hope in God’s love which puts aside punishment in favor of reconciliation. True faith does lead us to hope. It gives us the courage to make a break with the past. It allows us to make concrete changes in behavior and to make a new beginning. Continual repentance is the Christian’s way of life.

That’s the story of Jonah. It’s a story of hope as is the New Testament—“God so loved the world.” I hope you will read it for yourself. I especially wish that all the prophets who continually talk of God’s destruction would read it especially. God is openhearted. God looks at Nineveh with love. The Ninevehs of this world can be changed by God. God is not willing that any shall perish, and God shall have God’s way.

I like especially what one biblical commentator on Jonah wrote: “If there is hope for the church and the world, it is not because of the faith of so-called believers. It certainly does not rest on the pious. Our hope is in the power of God’s Word, which can change water into wine, Jonah into a prophet, and you and me into disciples of Jesus.” Amen.